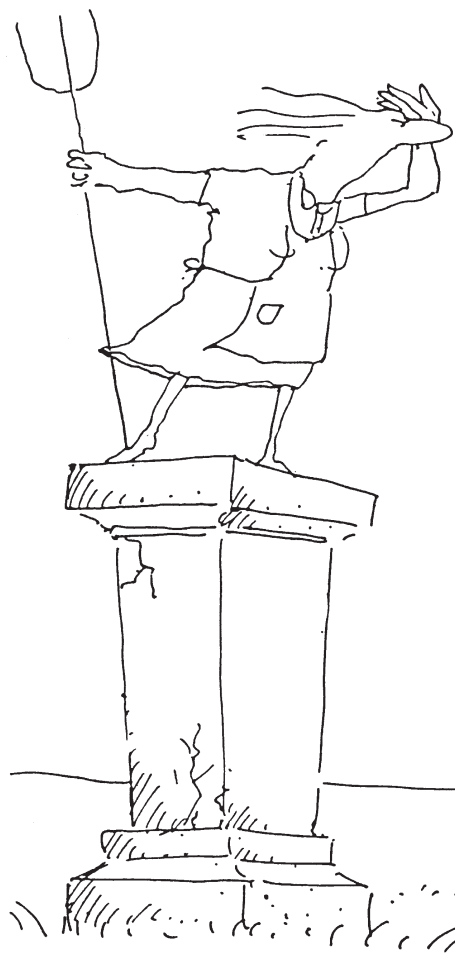




Looking back and ***moving forward***

A selected review of the Rural Women's Nnetwork
program 1992-1999



Acknowledgements

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- ♦ **Participants in the focus groups:**
 - Sydney:** Susan Mitchell, Tammy Carney, Fran Rowe, Pat le Lievre, Maryanne Kelly and Helen Cathles.
 - Bega:** Kay Rogers, Barbara Rogers, Glenda Owens, Sarah Buckler, Helen Roberts, Sheelagh Brunton, Robyn Allen, Susan Mitchell, Sue Denham, Keva Gocher, Glenda Owens & Jane Oglive
 - Orange:** Reg Kidd, Essie Sullivan, Jan Richards, Trixie Hawke and Joyce Pascoe.
 - Tocal:** Jane Reynolds, Bev Adams, Tammy Carney, Barbara O'Brien, Dianne Lee, Monica Boland, Val O'Brien, Helen Brown, Thora Halson and Cathy Wilson.
- ♦ Peter Worsley, Resource Information Unit, NSW Agriculture for producing the wonderful maps.

All the comments have been valuable. They have contributed to completing a picture of the RWN's effectiveness and highlighting potential areas for future directions.

Obviously the RWN cannot act upon all suggestions but it will aim to better complement actions by other agencies to ensure it continues to meet its objectives and more effectively meet the needs of rural women in NSW.

The Review Team: Margot Fagan, Sonia Muir, Margaret Carroll, Allison Windus, Anne Muir and David Hartley.

Disclaimer

Recognising that some of the information in this document is provided by third parties, the State of New South Wales, the authors and the publisher take no responsibility for the accuracy, currency, reliability and correctness of any information included in the document provided by third parties.

Looking back and moving forward

A selected review of the Rural Women's Network program 1992-1999.

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NSW Agriculture March 1999

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Compiled by Sonia Muir and Margot Fagan

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Desktop published by Rural Women's Network staff: Sonia Muir and Allison Windus.

Cartoon from the *Women on the Land* booklet, NSW Women's Advisory Council 1986.

For copies contact

Rural Women's Network, NSW Agriculture, Locked Bag 21, Orange 2800

Ph: 02 6391 3620 Fax: 02 6391 3650

allison.windus@agric.nsw.gov.au

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Purpose and introduction to the review

The purpose of this review is to:

1. see how effective the Rural Women's Network has been as a whole;
2. see how effective *The Country Web* newsletter and the *Women of the Land Gatherings* have been;
3. identify the current needs of rural women and their families (which would also provide input into the future directions of the RWN); and
4. identify an appropriate ongoing review/management process.

Introduction

This report documents and reflects on the activities and achievements of the Rural Women's Network (RWN). Evaluation is an essential element of any organisation, program or project. Whilst the RWN has evaluated and monitored its many individual projects and *The Country Web* newsletter, the overall program had not yet been reviewed in the 6 years since its inception.

Through consulting with rural women and key stakeholders this Review aims to consolidate the RWN program and provide ideas for the future.

The Review covers feedback from over 250 people who responded to questionnaires and/or participated in focus groups and semi structured interviews. The report is divided into the following sections.

- Summary and outcomes
- Methodology.
- Background.
- Feedback from the Review is divided into the following sections:
 - (i) Overall feedback on the Rural Women's Network.
 - (ii) The RWN newsletter ~ *The Country Web*.
 - (iii) *Women of the Land Gatherings*.
 - (iv) The RWN State Advisory Committee.
 - (v) Priority issues for rural women.

The appendices include copies of both the general and *Country Web* questionnaires.

This review will be used by the RWN for future planning. Ideas and suggestions raised will be carefully considered and where possible incorporated into future work plans and strategies.

The Report will be distributed widely to interested agencies and individuals including those who contributed to the Review process. It is hoped that they too will use the RWN Review as a valuable resource.

Summary and outcomes

The Review of the Rural Women's Network (RWN) has been valuable in assessing its role in improving opportunities for rural women in NSW.

The Review involved a consultation process with over 250 people - including rural women and various stakeholders. A variety of methods were used including questionnaires, focus groups and semi structured interviews.

From the feedback, it can be affirmed that the RWN has been an effective way of exchanging information with rural women and their families as well as playing a role in developing an awareness of rural women's issues.

The strengths of the RWN has been the development of a strong communications network with rural women and key networks - primarily through the *Country Web* newsletter, the *Women of the Land Gatherings* and numerous partnership projects.

The RWN has provided opportunities for women to network with others, to share their issues and concerns and become better informed about available services. The fact that the *Country Web* is free, and the growing mailing list exceeds 13,000 individual subscribers (from zero in 1993) is testimony to its success.

There are still areas which will need to be addressed including promoting activities and providing opportunities for younger rural women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) women and women from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB).

Key outcomes for the Rural Women's Network

The key outcomes relate to the original purpose of this review which was to:

1. see how effective the Rural Women's Network has been as a whole;
2. see how effective *The Country Web* newsletter and the *Women of the Land Gatherings* have been;
3. identify the current needs of rural women and their families (which would also provide input into the future directions of the RWN); and
4. identify an appropriate ongoing review/management process.

1. How effective has the Rural Women's Network been as a whole?

The review reaffirms the RWN's important role in continuing to work with rural women. However, there was a strong feeling that the RWN needs to reconnect with *grassroots* women and develop strategies to address their concerns as well as those of other special interest groups of women who seem to fall through the gaps.

Actions for the RWN:

- 1.1 review the RWN goal and objectives to ensure the program reflects the current needs of rural women;
- 1.2 continue to network and improve links with decision makers, women's groups, interested individuals and agencies to share information, resources and skills for the benefit of rural women in NSW;
- 1.3 continue to support local and regional women's initiatives on the basis of the self-help approach;
- 1.4 develop stronger links with NSW Agriculture staff (and other appropriate agencies/groups) to assist in promoting RWN activities;

- 1.5 continue to promote rural women and their contribution to the community in a positive manner;
- 1.6 research the needs, and develop more inclusive ways of involving diverse rural women in RWN activities;
- 1.7 review structure: role, terms of reference and membership of the State Advisory Committee (SAC) to ensure it retains a diverse representation of rural women;
- 1.8 develop promotional strategies for the SAC to be more visible (especially the co-chair).

2. How effective have The Country Web newsletter and the Women of the Land Gatherings been?

The Country Web was given overwhelming support. It is seen as a valuable resource – not only used by rural women and their families – but as a conduit for agencies wishing to exchange information with rural people. There were many suggestions made to improve the layout, content and design which have been taken on board. It was also acknowledged that the cost of producing the newsletter is high and suggestions were made for offsetting some of these. As many people weren't able to get to the Women of the Land *Gatherings* it was suggested that regional gatherings as well as a statewide gathering could be held.

Actions for the RWN:

- 2.1 continue producing and freely distributing the *Country Web* three times a year on various themes taking into account suggestions made to layout, design and content;
- 2.2 review distribution maps and target areas which have lower subscriptions. (The promotion of the *Country Web* newsletter was seen as a high priority.)
- 2.3 continue to use the newsletter to highlight key issues of concern to rural women;
- 2.4 investigate future directions for the RWN internet site;
- 2.5 continue to support and develop strategies to ensure the *Women of the Land Gatherings* are promoted to **ALL** rural women regardless of background and/or involvement in farming.

3. What are the current needs of rural women and their families?

The Review was also used as an opportunity to identify rural women's current needs and issues. Issues identified included: access to services and facilities (especially health); access to information and support; better access to relevant education and training; information technology and telecommunications; farming/agriculture; recognition of women; rural and regional development; financial security, business decline and survival; family; environment; roads and transport.

Actions for the RWN:

- 3.1 develop mechanisms to identify current issues facing rural women and ways to address these;
- 3.2 continue to advocate rural women's issues to government and non government agencies to ensure their issues are on the agenda.

4. How can the RWN improve its ongoing review/management processes?

The Review highlights the importance of maintaining effective consultative

mechanisms to provide opportunities for women and stakeholders to:

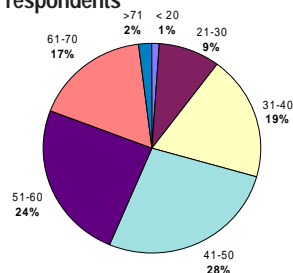
- find out about the RWN;
- comment on RWN activities; and
- maintain the RWN's high level of awareness about issues of concern to rural women and their families.

Actions for the RWN:

- 4.1 gather annual feedback on RWN activities and current issues through various avenues including the State Advisory Committee (SAC), focus groups and questionnaires at events such as *Women of the Land Gatherings* or through the *Country Web* newsletter;
- 4.2 Use the State Advisory Committee (SAC), focus groups and questionnaires at events such as the *Women of the Land Gatherings* or through the *Country Web* newsletter to consult on current issues;
- 4.3 use the State Action Plan and National Plan for women in agriculture and resource management as a monitoring and evaluation tool.

Methodology

Age of both questionnaire respondents



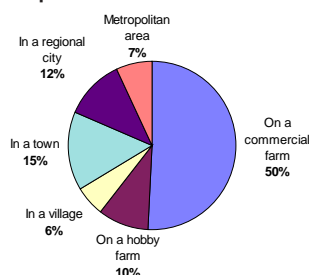
Approximately 70% of respondents were between 41-70yrs, and of this group 28% were aged between 41-50yrs. Approximately 30% were aged between 20-40yrs.

98% of survey respondents were women.

97% of respondents had prior knowledge of the Rural Women's Network.

38% of respondents considered themselves partners in a farm business while 33% were full time or part time paid employees. 2% said they were unpaid and a further 10% were voluntary workers. 17% of respondents selected 'other' and considered themselves to be either self employed, students, owner/operators of a family farm, retired or mothers.

Where questionnaire (both) respondents lived.



Resources used as part of the review:

- Past RWN reports;
- Victorian Rural Women's Network review ~ *More than one way*; and
- Networking Systems for rural women, by Dr Margaret Grace, Rural Industries & Research Development Corporation (RIRDC) Research Paper no. 97/4, March 1997.

The Review Team was coordinated by the Program Leader for Rural Community Development and the Coordinator of the Rural Women's Network. The Team also involved NSW Agriculture staff. Nearly 250 people -stakeholders, rural women, government and non government agencies - contributed to the Review.

Objectives

To assist the Rural Women's Network (RWN) to:

1. see how effective the RWN has been as a whole;
2. see how effective *The Country Web* newsletter and the *Women of the Land Gatherings* have been;
3. identify the current needs of rural women and their families (which would also provide input into the future directions of the RWN); and
4. identify an appropriate ongoing review/management process.

Research Techniques

The Review was carried out on a statewide basis and involved:

- 2 random questionnaires (general and Country Web specific);
- 4 focus groups; and
- 15 semi-structured interviews (by telephone or face to face).

Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were distributed at random through *The Country Web* Spring 1998 *Women in Decision Making* newsletter and at field days and events. In addition, many were sent to agencies with whom the RWN had worked with in the past. In total, over 200 people responded to both the questionnaires reflecting the wide views and issues documented.

The questionnaires were a combination of 'tick box' and written response type questions. In trying to synthesize the richness of the responses, the Review Team attempted to draw together the common themes which emerged without compromising the diversity of views.

A fuller record of all the responses has been kept for future reference.

The Review gave valuable feedback on what has been successful in the past and identified areas where the RWN can develop future directions. The Review was also used as an opportunity to identify rural women's current needs and issues.

Focus Groups

During 1998, focus groups were held with the State Advisory Committee (Sydney) and groups in Bega, Tocal and Orange. Each focus group included members of the community as well as service providers. A set of standard questions were developed to obtain the feedback. These questions also formed the basis for the semi-structured interviews.

The Tocal Focus group included mainly members of the Tocal *Women of the Land Gatherings* committee. Bega was chosen as the RWN has had little exposure in the South Coast area. Conversely, the Orange group was chosen because the RWN is based in Orange and was the site of the first *Women of the Land Gathering*.

Semi-structured interviews

One-to-one interviews were also a part of the process and included interviews with NSW Department for Women; National Rural Women's Unit; ABC Radio; Rural Youth; Orana Council of Adult and Community Education; Women Out West; NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS); the Minister for Agriculture and other key people.

Background

The NSW Rural Women's Network (RWN), based in NSW Agriculture, was established in May 1992 along with its community-based State Advisory Committee (SAC) as a three year statewide program.

The program was established initially to develop an effective communications network for rural women, and identify and address their priority needs. The current RWN objectives have a much broader focus.

At the time of this review the RWN's focus was to:

- provide information and referrals;
- consult on important issues;
- address their concerns and needs;
- develop projects with other agencies;
- promote the participation of rural women;
- build communication networks; and
- advise on policy.

Over the years, the RWN has been involved in many projects for rural women in their local communities and developed an extensive network with rural women and service providers in NSW and interstate. It also initiated the free newsletter - *The Country Web* and has provided support for events such as the annual NSW *Women of the Land Gathering*.

The RWN has operated mainly through its three staff members and **State Advisory Committee** members (SAC) who represent major rural networks in NSW. The Director-General of NSW Agriculture, jointly chairs the SAC with a community representative. Susan Mitchell, representing NSW Farmers' Association, is the current co-chair.

RURAL



Past RWN State Advisory Committee community co-chairs:

- 1992-94: Audrey Hardman OAM from the NSW Women's Consultative Committee from Mandurama;
- 1994-96: Fran Rowe, Rural Financial Counsellor from Tottenham; and
- 1996-98: Pat Le Lievre, Western Division, from Cobar.

History of rural women's networks in Australia

Clients

In the broadest sense *rural women* comprise all women living outside the major urban population centres - agricultural women, women in mining communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from non-English speaking, ethnic backgrounds, women who live in remote locations, in small villages, towns or in the better serviced regional centres.

While the difficulties encountered by women in accessing high level positions in the public and corporate sectors have been recognised and have been the subject of major government policy, there was less attention on issues facing women in rural communities and on their participation and role in rural community development.

The development of rural women's networks in Australia has aimed to achieve social change in rural communities, harnessing the commitment and communication skills of organisational leaders and ensuring a sense of ownership and involvement by individual rural women. The activities of rural women's networks have ranged from producing newsletters, organising activities to bring rural women together, holding conferences, providing information, education and training, identifying issues and presenting those to policy makers.

Major rural women's networks and their newsletters in Australia include:

- New South Wales Rural Women's Network;
- Victorian Rural Women's Network;
- Queensland Rural Women's Network Inc;
- Tasmanian Women in Agriculture;
- Dairy Women's Networks (various);

Who are rural women?

Rural women are:

- women who live in remote locations;
- agricultural women;
- mining women;
- women in the fishing industry;
- Aboriginal women;
- women from non-English speaking backgrounds;
- town women;
- village women;
- women who live in regional cities; and
- coastal women.

RWN Special Report

In 1996, the RWN produced a *Special Report May 1992-June 1996: Achievements and Future Directions*.

It provided an overview of the RWN's activities over the four years since its establishment.

- Welink (electronic network for rural women);
- Western Australian Rural Remote and Regional Women's Network;
- South Australian Rural Network - not exclusively for women;
- Northern Territory *Bush Buzz* (a newsletter for women and families);
- Country Women's Association;
- Australian Women in Agriculture;
- New South Wales Women in Agriculture; and
- Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women.

The NSW Rural Women's Network

Following the Parkes Women's Conference in 1991 which attracted over 650 rural women from throughout NSW, a proposal was put to the Premier to establish a *Rural Women's Network* (RWN) in NSW. The Conference identified the need for rural women to be better informed, to share ideas and concerns, to have access to information on available services/resources and to be able to speak in a united voice about their needs.

The Premier approved the proposal in December 1991. In May 1992, a RWN Coordinator was appointed to work from the newly relocated NSW Agriculture Head Office in Orange.

The RWN's overall goal has been:

'to enhance the opportunities for rural women and rural families in New South Wales by promoting the development and facilitation of efficient and effective programs and communication networks.'

The current objectives of the RWN are to:

1. establish a dynamic communication network for rural women;
2. act as a catalyst to effectively consult, identify and address issues [relevant to rural women];
3. develop innovative rural service models; and
4. recognise rural women's contributions and achievements.

While the RWN has consistently maintained its primary goal, it has changed objectives over time to meet the current identified needs.

Over the past 6 years the activities of the RWN can be broadly described as having involved:

- exchanging information;
- consulting and gathering information from rural women;
- providing policy input to government;
- facilitating and supporting training initiatives to rural women;
- promoting leadership; and
- raising the profile of rural women generally.

The RWN community-based State Advisory Committee (SAC) is made up of nine women representing key networks from across the state. The SAC was established to:

- enable appropriate input, consultation and policy development advice from rural women's organisations and other interested parties;
- provide a sounding board on rural women's issues; and
- assist the RWN Coordinator in determining priorities and developing strategies.

Women in agriculture and resource management

In March 1997, the National Forum for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management brought together 200 men and women from across Australia -

decision makers in industry, community and government to recognise and support the work of women from rural and remote areas.

The Forum was the catalyst for *A Vision for Change - National Plan for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management*. The National Plan was developed jointly by the State and Commonwealth Rural Women's Working Group (under the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management - SCARM). It was launched in November 1998 by the Hon Mark Vaile, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

Reflecting the vision and principles of the National Plan, each State, Territory and the Commonwealth have developed their own independent Action Plans.

In NSW, *Making a Difference: an action plan for NSW women in agriculture and resource management*, has been developed through extensive consultation with key stakeholders. The Plan draws together strategies from government, industry and community organisations.

The NSW Action Plan is also a resource document with many examples of agencies and groups already making a difference. It was launched in October 1998 at the Cooma Women of the Land Gathering by the Director General of NSW Agriculture, Dr Kevin Sheridan.

The RWN coordinated the development of the NSW Action Plan with involvement from key people from industry, government and community organisations in NSW and gathered endorsement of the Plan from many organisations. The Plan aims to be dynamic with agencies, groups and individuals being able to provide feedback on progress and contribute new strategies annually to NSW Agriculture.

Projects undertaken by the Rural Women's Network

The priority issues of rural women were initially identified through consultations such as the *Rural Women's Satellite Project* (RWSP) organised jointly by RWN (NSW Agriculture), NSW TAFE, NSW Health and the NSW Board of Adult and Community Education. The RWSP was the catalyst for many RWN's projects which aimed to address some of the issues raised.

The main issues identified from 1992-1998

1992 to 1995:

- isolation;
- women's health;
- lack of relevant information;
- lack of communications; and
- need for drought support.

1995 to 1996:

- lack of access to relevant learning opportunities;
- exploring the roles of women in agriculture;

1996-1998:

- increasing participation of women in decision making; and
- supporting women as agents of change.

The RWN has undertaken the following projects (many as partnerships):

- *Country Care Link* 1800 helpline, (1992 - ongoing) statewide.
- *The Country Web* newsletter (1993 - ongoing) statewide.
- *Women of the Land Gatherings* (1993 - ongoing) statewide. (The RWN initiated the first Gathering with Farmsafe Central West and has assisted the subsequent local Gathering organising committees).
- *Building Stronger Communities* Project (1993-97) Orana/Far West.
- *Work Opportunities for Women* project for isolated women (1993) North Coast.
- *Rural Women's Satellite Project* (1993-94) statewide.



The vision for the National Plan and the NSW Action Plan for women in agriculture and resource management is:

'to achieve profitable and innovative agricultural industries and sustainable resource management and vibrant rural communities, by realizing the full potential of women'.

The goals of *Making a difference : an action plan for NSW women in agriculture and resource management* are:

- increase rural women's participation in decision making;
- recognise women as clients; and
- increase women's participation in the rural sector.

Stepping Stones ~ a grassroots leadership program for rural women

10% of respondents said they'd like to initiate a *Stepping Stones* program.

"More community programs such as *Stepping Stones*. The RWN should develop these programs in response to issues."

"Many of the women that were in the *Stepping Stones* programs said that they would go to NSW Farmers' meetings and would feel very disempowered because they didn't really know how to intercede, or how to call to order something."

"The places that we went to had extraordinary successes. The women really developed. They learned skills that would really help them cope and develop their communities as well. They did things like conflict resolution and meeting procedures."

- *Challenge of Change* Project (1994 and 1997) statewide.
- *Luncheon on the Plains Arts Project* (1994) South West.
- *The Country Guide* (1995-96) statewide.
- Australian National Field Days feature of *Women in Agriculture* (1995) Orange statewide.
- *Let's Talk* video (1995) statewide.
- *Business Mentoring and Leadership Project* (1995) Central West.
- *Stepping Stones*, leadership project (1996-97) Central West.
- *Memoirs* project (1996-97) Central West and New England.
- *Team Up & Prosper* Rural Women in Decision Making Forum (1997) statewide initiative in Orange.
- *Rural Decision Makers course* with the Australian Institute of Company Directors (1998 and planned for 1999) - sourced funding for 8 NSW agricultural women to attend.
- RWN Internet site (1998 - ongoing).

Changes in the rural sector and developments in women's organisations since 1992

Many of the issues initially identified by rural women and the RWN in 1992, such as isolation, lack of communication and information, a need for further learning opportunities, and a need to raise the profile of rural women in Australia, have significantly improved.

Agricultural businesses and rural communities have much greater access to information technology. There have been enormous developments in the area of electronic communications. Personal computers in the home (often linked to modems for information networks including the internet), mobile phones, CD-ROMs and faxback information systems are some of the new information delivery systems now available.

Over 70% of farm families now use personal computers and faxes. Over 50% use mobile phones. Nearly 20% use the internet (Farmwide Internet Demand Survey, November 1997). This has opened up many opportunities for rural and regional people.

The inaugural *International Conference on Women in Agriculture* was held in Melbourne in 1994, with the Second Conference held in Washington D.C. in June 1998. The Melbourne Conference firmly captured the determined spirit of rural women to further advance their potential contributions to Australia.

Along with this, there was an emergence of rural women's organisations such as *Australian Women in Agriculture* (AWiA, 1993), and *The Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women* (FAAW, 1995). The Country Women's Association (CWA) also began to broaden its focus to include various contemporary rural issues and training initiatives. These organisations provide new avenues for rural women to contribute to government policy development.

There are a number of both Commonwealth and NSW government agencies primarily dealing with women's issues and providing policy advice. The Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women emerged from the Women's Affairs Section in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1974.

In 1995, the Commonwealth Rural Women's Unit (RWU) was established in the Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE). The Unit aimed to deal with issues and policies for women in agriculture and resource management, following the 1994 International Conference on Women in Agriculture. Its charter is to work with the DPIE to improve recognition of the diverse roles

Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA)

AWiA aims to raise the profile of women in agriculture and work to ensure sustainability of agricultural industries 'for future generations'. In 1995 AWiA was one of the peak national women's organisations to receive operational funding from the federal Office of the Status of Women.

rural women play in the rural sector and develop strategies which will enhance women's participation in industry and government decision making on issues which impact on their lives, businesses, families and communities.

The NSW Department for Women was established 1995 with a vision to work with the whole of government to significantly improve opportunities for women in NSW. It promotes social justice principles in relation to women.

The *ABC Rural Woman of the Year* awards started in 1994, and have considerably lifted the profile of rural women, adding a diversity of opinions to the public arena primarily through the media. This award has contributed to a greater understanding and appreciation of women's roles in the rural sector.

Rural leadership programs have been available for a number of years. However, it is only recently that leadership programs specifically targeting rural women have emerged such as the Dairy and pig industry women's leadership programs and the NSW Farmers' women's leadership programs. The benefits of such training acknowledges diversity in decision making as good management practice

Some people have questioned the need to continue to have a *women only* network and argue that by making *women* a special case it reinforces a stereotype of women needing to be treated differently to progress. They argue that instead of 'marginalising' women, the RWN is better targeting its activities to achieve *better community outcomes* generally.

Some women have commented that there is a risk that *women only* activities, encourage the classification of these activities as *women's business*, thereby men are not encouraged to learn about a particular issue or skill, and not understand women's perspectives on issues. This is especially a problem when there are shared concerns or interests such as learning more about computers and financial management tools.

This Review aims to see what the current feelings are in the community about rural women's issues, how the RWN can better help to meet the needs of rural women and their families, and to ensure the RWN does not duplicate what other agencies are aiming to achieve.

Some milestones for NSW rural women

1992	RWN program established; Country Care Link launched.
1993	Assistant Coordinator recruited; Country Web newsletter launched; 1st NSW Women of the Land Gathering, Orange; Rural Women's Satellite Project;
1994	2nd Gathering in Gunnedah; ABC Rural Woman of the Year launched; Luncheon on the Plains arts project, South West; Drought support workers in place; RWN Project Officer established;
1995	3rd Gathering, Yanco; UN 4th conference on women; 1st National rural women's forum; Let's talk video produced; Business and mentoring project; Women in Agriculture feature at Australian National Field Days
1996	4th Gathering, Cobar; Stepping Stones launched; Memoirs project;
1997	5th Gathering, Tocal; National forum on women in agriculture and resource management ; NSW Team up and Prosper forum.
1998	6th Gathering, Cooma; RWN home page established; Making a difference an action plan for NSW women in agriculture and resource management launched; National Plan also launched; 2nd Int. women in agriculture conference, USA; RWN Review conducted.
1999	7th Gathering, Moree.



Past and current Rural Womens' Network State Advisory Committee members and NSW Agriculture Staff (October 1998).



Susan Mitchell from Cooma represents the NSW Farmers' Association. Susan is the current community co-chair of the Rural Women's Network State Advisory Committee.

Overall feedback on the Rural Women's Network

Feedback from questionnaires

Random questionnaires (with a section on *Women of the Land Gatherings*) were sent to 500 *Country Web* subscribers in the Spring 1998 edition. A further 300 were sent to project participants - 83 responses were received from this *general* questionnaire.

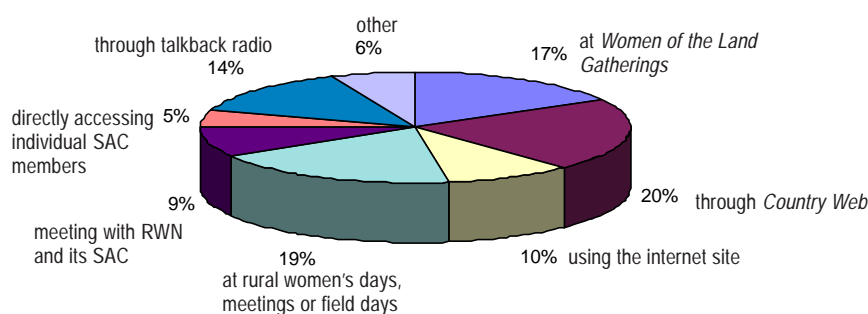
The questionnaire feedback indicated that most respondents had been involved with the RWN through reading *The Country Web* newsletter, attending *Women of the Land Gathering's*, participating in a project and/or contacting the RWN for information or referral.

- The main benefits highlighted by women from these projects included: prompting them to access information and services to better meet their needs,
- enabling an input to decision making on concerns important to them;
- becoming more active in their communities or areas of interest; and
- building on their communication skills and networks.

The main suggestions on "*how the RWN services could be improved?*" included:

- having a more grassroots focus and more face-to-face interaction at women's days etc;
- being more active in areas of the greatest need, such as isolated and regional areas which have not as yet been targeted;
- developing a more visible role for the State Advisory Committee (SAC) and its community co-chair; and
- increasing people's awareness of *The Country Web* and the *Women of the Land Gatherings* through better, more targeted and more extensive promotion.

In response to the question "*how can the RWN consult with rural women more effectively on ways to address important issues?*"



"...communication and networking is vital to these groups and myself. I find the RWN to be feminine, not feminist, assertive, not aggressive, loving not leaving - a great support network to ourselves as well as our families. We need to learn to live with men and their skills etc. not as them - a big difference."

In response to the question "*how can the RWN most effectively meet the needs of rural women in the future?*" those surveyed said that the main ways were to:

- provide an avenue for rural women to inform government about rural issues;
- continue to target rural women as its primary focus;
- promote the profile of rural women in the broader community; and
- provide relevant information on rural women's issues.

In response to the question "*how can the RWN best help rural women to*

achieve positive outcomes in their communities?" Those surveyed said that the main ways were to:

- maintain *The Country Web* as a primary communications tool;
- consult with rural women about rural issues and ways to address these;
- assist women in representing the views of their community to government; and
- provide rural women with information on community programs and funding.

In response to the question "*how would you like to work with the RWN?"* Those surveyed said that the main ways were to:

- find out more about the NSW Action Plan;
- have input on issues and ways to address these;
- be involved in a project; and
- put their name on the RWN contact list.

Feedback from focus groups

David Hartley (Regional Director of Agriculture) facilitated the three focus groups which were held in Sydney, Bega and Orange. Cameron Archer (Principal, Tocal Agricultural College, Paterson) facilitated the Tocal focus group.

The main questions posed to the focus groups were:

1. How well has the RWN met the needs of rural women and their families?

The Prompt Questions were: (although not all were necessarily asked)

- What activities have been successful?
- What activities have not been successful?
- What is the most appropriate organisation to run the program?
- Has there been duplication?
- What have we learned?

2. What are the priorities and future needs of rural women and how should these needs be met?

The Prompt Questions were:

- Who should the program target?
- What problems are facing rural women?
- What will their priorities be?
- What activities should be run?
- How can the program be improved?

Objectives of the RWN Program

The Sydney focus group thought the RWN's objectives were appropriate and relevant. The other focus groups were not asked this question, although the Orange focus group commented that the RWN had changed and evolved as issues changed.

Has the RWN been effective in achieving its objectives?

The focus groups thought the benefits of the RWN were mainly through:

- providing support for rural women;
- providing companionship;
- providing a social outlet;
- improving communication;
- building up personal confidence and self esteem; and
- raising awareness of women's issues.

While there was an overall view that the RWN had been very effective, the feedback from the Bega focus group highlighted that some regions (mostly coastal and some inland 'black-spots') had limited knowledge of the RWN and its

activities.

The Orange focus group commented that the RWN had helped to change the mindset of both males and females and played an important role in influencing political change. They also commented on the hard work and dedication of the three full time staff. Strategic alliances and partnerships developed by the RWN were recognised as also contributing to its success.

The Sydney focus group commented on the importance of the ongoing commitment of the Director-General to the RWN. The Sydney group also highlighted the fact that the achievements of the RWN was only part of what was happening to assist rural women and communities in NSW.

What activities have been Successful?

There was wide and often enthusiastic support for *The Country Web* newsletter. There was also strong support from those who had attended *Women of the Land Gatherings*. The *Stepping Stones* program was mentioned as a successful and widely needed program and wanted to see it run in their area. The *Team up and Prosper* ~ women in decision making forum was also raised by the Orange focus group as being beneficial.

What activities could be improved?

The following comments generally relate to the RWN as a whole. Suggestions for *The Country Web*, the *Women of the Land Gatherings* and the State Advisory Committee are included in their respective sections.

All groups commented that the RWN needed to be a *grassroots* program. It was suggested that there is a feeling in the community that the RWN is getting away from the fundamental issues.

The Orange focus group commented that because the RWN is a very small unit it cannot be all things to all people, so it should focus on the areas of greatest need, in areas which have had limited exposure to the RWN as well as in the more isolated areas. This comment was reiterated by the Bega focus group who felt disadvantaged and felt that their area had been neglected. They suggested that the RWN should have a spokeswoman's tour of the area. The Bega focus group also commented that they would like to hear more about the experiences of *grassroots* rural women rather than *high fliers*.

Both the Orange and Tocal focus groups thought that all NSW Agriculture staff (and staff from other agencies) should be proactive in promoting the RWN to the community. This tied in with a suggestion from the Tocal focus group that RWN have sub committees run in each of the 8 NSW Agriculture's consultative regions so these committees could be seen to be involved with local field days, running workshops/ programs etc as well as promoting the RWN.

Who should run the RWN?

Most focus group participants thought that NSW Agriculture was the preferred Department to operate the RWN. Some said the Department for Women would be appropriate if the RWN took on a much broader focus. Others saw the Department for Health as an option, as health is seen as a major issue for rural women.

Who Should the Program Target?

All focus groups commented that rural women should remain the primary target of the RWN, with effort made to include all age groups, races, geographic areas, and industries. They thought that families and men should be included where appropriate.

What Are the Priority Needs of Rural Women?

This section is dealt with on pages 31-32 and summarises priority needs from all the methods used.

Feedback from semi-structured interviews

Fifteen people were interviewed as part of the RWN Review by Anne Muir

"The RWN is not an organisation, so it doesn't have to do the same thing year after year, it is a growth thing. It is a network to develop and create, it needs creativity to keep it going, to feed it."

Target group

There were some people (especially in the coastal regions, many townspeople and Aboriginal people) who did not perceive that the term 'rural' applied to them and associated it with just being for 'farmer's wives'. Some alternative terms were suggested which included 'fresh water' and 'saltwater'.

(Regional Director of Agriculture, Gunnedah) and Geoff Warr (Program Leader - Farming For the Future). This is a summary of the combined responses.

All interviewees were asked the same series of questions as follows:

1. What do you see has been the impact of the RWN on rural women communities ?

Networking and information exchange:

- providing information to women;
- reducing the isolation that women feel;
- enabling a different form of community consultation/communication;
- bridging the gap between bureaucracy and the 'grassroots' community; and
- helping women to set up their own networks.

Empowering role

- creating a sense of unity among women;
- developing skills and building confidence;
- providing an important contact point for information about issues of concern to NSW rural women.
- empowering women to attain their full potential through programs such as *Stepping Stones* and the grief and loss projects; and
- initially rural people found it difficult to ask for help. By being able to contact the RWN to find out what was available to them, it has given many people confidence and enhanced their opportunities.

Advocacy

- developing the State Action Plan for women in agriculture and resource management; and
- RWN has been an efficient advocate for rural women in relevant forums.

Raising issues

- contributing towards a *people focus* in agriculture; and
- increasing an awareness of gender issues.

Recognising rural women

- bringing visibility to the fact that women are vitally concerned about rural communities issues, and agriculture;
- contributing to the recognition of women as agents of change in the community;
- articulating rural women's experiences which adds to community development;
- contributing to the change in both women's and men's attitudes over time especially with some industry groups having programs for women's leadership and decision making skills (assisted by media coverage); and
- having an organisation which understands the complexity of rural women's lives and looks after rural women's concerns has been an important symbol for them.

2. How well do you think the RWN has met the needs of rural women and their families ?

- Difficult to measure the RWN's impact on rural communities. There is no shortage of issues and they are often large and have long term impacts.
- The RWN has tried to focus on issues and not any particular group of women.
- RWN cannot fix all problems, but can try and help build opportunities for rural women and their families to take care of themselves.
- RWN has been a valuable contact point for women in the bush and probably met some of their information needs.
- Was successful in some geographic areas (but not right across the State) and on some particular issues (such as isolation and lack of communications - especially during the drought).
- The RWN is under-resourced both in human and financial terms, but has made considerable achievements in view of these constraints. The lack of resources

"The most important communication linkage and information exchange has been through *The Country Web*."

"*Stepping Stones* has been good, but needs to be bedded down, for rural women to build up their confidence and self esteem to become better communicators within their communities and better participants."

"If you empower women, you give strength to the family unit. That has been the greatest achievement in my opinion. The fact that we have developed communication linkages, we have enthused women, we have got them together physically, we have actually contacted them in every area of the state and drawn together from the most remote areas."

precluded the RWN being able to work effectively with other strategic programs like the Regional Coordinators program.

- If the RWN was located in the Department of State and Regional Development or a human service agency, it may have been supported more effectively.
 - Focus on rural women needs to be *inclusive* and not just be about farming women. RWN needs to broaden its focus to include those from towns and rural cities and other groups.
 - Focus attention on who gets the *Country Web* or which organisations eg schools and libraries.
 - One of the difficulties has been to what extent are governments happy for networks to play almost an advocacy role on behalf of women.
 - Was successful in accessing project funding. [Nearly \$400,000 has been sourced over the 6 years.]
 - RWN brought together disparate and uncoordinated groups to work strategically on bigger projects for rural women eg the *NSW Action Plan for women in agriculture and resource management*.
3. Do you think there has been any duplication with other programs/ initiatives ? How can we better complement other existing/future projects/programs?

Duplication:

- There was a perception during the 1994-96 drought that the RWN and Drought Support Workers were doing similar things.
- Probably not much duplication - there is more complementaries than duplication because the issues were so large.
- No duplication with the *Country Web* or with the *Women of the Land Gatherings*.
- Not aware of any duplication, but could complement other projects/programs more effectively through the *Country Web*.
- At present there is no overlap between the work of the Department for Women (DFW), the Premier's Council for Women (PCW) and the RWN.
- DFW would like to work closer through its whole of government approach to the provision of services to ensure there isn't duplication.

Complementing with other agencies:

- Having 3 people covering the whole of NSW is not excessive. The staff network, link with SCARM (Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management) processes and link with other agencies.
- RWN needs to work more closely to link with other agencies and community based organisations eg migrant women and *Stepping Stones*.
- The DFW could complement existing projects/programs in the area of information technology with partnerships programs.
- The RWN has always been very much into partnership projects.
- The RWN should form partnerships with Environment Protection Authority (EPA), National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC), Department of Urban Affairs and Planning (DUAP), Health etc.
- More could be done with TAFE, Adult and Community Education (ACE), agricultural colleges and Charles Sturt University (CSU) with courses for women in decision making.
- One of the objectives of the RWN is to provide referrals. They rely a good deal on WIRS (DFW's Women's Information and Referral Service) to do this work. However, some women feel more comfortable talking to people in the country which is another benefit of the RWN.
- The RWN identified three main issues in the NSW Action Plan ~ women's participation in decision making, women recognised as clients and women's participation in the rural sector.
- The RWN should focus on the community as a whole, rather than purely agricultural activities. This would provide a greater and more diverse range of

RWN externally funded projects:

\$26,240	Orange <i>Women of the Land Gathering</i> ;
\$156,000	Building Stronger Communities;
\$46,000	Rural Women's Satellite Project;
\$10,000	Luncheon on the Plains;
\$3,000	Australian National Field Days women in agriculture feature;
\$15,000	Let's Talk video;
\$70,000	Business and Mentoring project;
\$24,000	Stepping Stones;
\$6747	Memoirs Project;
\$20,000	Rural Decision Makers course; and
\$20,500	Team up and Prosper forum.
\$397,487	total
(Many projects were in partnership with other agencies).	

"The philosophy has been "if somebody is doing it, then that is not what we do, but if there is a gap, if we can identify them, then that is where we work".

women with the opportunity to have input to policy making.

4. What priority issues should the RWN focus on? What are some ways to address these issues? (A full summary of issues is on page 30).

How can the RWN address issues?

- Isolation and problems of distance are some of the biggest issues facing rural women. Perhaps the RWN could focus on specific communities to develop new approaches to overcome the problems of isolation within identified areas.
- RWN could sponsor local community forums on issues and act as a facilitator.
- RWN could develop pilots to fill a gap in the marketplace and encourage other organisations or providers to run with it.
- Women's business should become everybody's business (eg NSW Action Plan).
- The RWN could spend a lot more time trying to help industry organisations and other organisations to be more *women friendly*, and help encourage women to move into the mainstream.
- RWN needs to continually determine what the needs are.
- There needs to be better coordination of the RWN with the DFW on programs and possible joint projects- there would be some value in doing a pilot program on how to cross the divide between rural women and town based women.
- Government could use the RWN to more effectively consult with rural people (eg inserts in *The Country Web*).
- Continue to encourage the development of leadership courses in all communities.
- In the immediate term a freecall number would help.
- The RWN should continue to consult with rural women, listen to their concerns and work to ensure that those concerns are reflected in government policies that meet the needs of rural women. This would require better ongoing resourcing and backup for the RWN.

5. How do you think the RWN can most effectively (help) meet the needs of rural women in the future?

- Information and communications are definitely the core work.
- Maintain and improve *The Country Web*.
- Develop more community programs such as *Stepping Stones*.
- Train women in key locations.
- Have a better structure for grassroots input.
- Clearly define the RWN's role and target audience.
- Create educational opportunities and networking courses with other agencies/ organizations.
- Help people take responsibility for trying to work out how rural women can fix problems
- Encourage women to not only inform bureaucrats about issues but actually think about possible solutions.
- Work needs to be done within government agencies on *workplace cultural change*.
- Inform women about government and industry policy and how the system works.
- Continue to provide a voice to government and the key areas where decisions are being made.
- Monitoring and reporting on the NSW Action Plan.
- Broaden focus to be more inclusive.
- Continue to build partnerships with other agencies, groups and individuals.
- Link closely to Premier's Regional Coordination Program on employment.
- RWN should stay in the Department of Agriculture, but have stronger links to the Department for Women.
- Maintain an international presence - Washington International Women in Agriculture Conference.

"The best way to better complement other existing/ future projects/programs, is this kind of process where you talk to people in other agencies, you find out what's going on, and work out how you can work in with them in the most effective fashion."

"What we have to do is not just go from Stepping Stones, which is the entree into women on boards. My real vision and passion is those women in the middle, the women that are going to keep the communities going, the women that are going to strengthen the families, the women that are going to go into local government, P&C's or go onto other community activities that are going to develop those communities the women that might develop and go into parliament".

From the Satellite project in 1995, "may be we have gone past some of those areas, but may be what we need to do now is reassess, and say 'have we achieved that?', what can we do to progress it further?".

"We've tried to get the information out about what is working well in one region, so the other region knows about it and the way to do that is through the WOLG's and the Webs."

- Leadership skills and development for rural people in general.
- There needs to be commitment to change from agencies to mainstreaming women's programs. Some key people could be consulted on how it would best be achieved. The media has a key role to play too.

"The RWN seems to have lost some momentum. It is time to go back out and reassess needs and issues."

Rural Women's Network State Advisory Committee

Feedback from questionnaires

- 78% of respondents said that they were aware of the RWN's community based State Advisory Committee (SAC). Most of those who did not know about the SAC wanted to know more and felt that then they could directly access individual SAC members.

"The RWN State Advisory Committee members have had their ears to the ground in their own areas, being able to funnel that information back to a central point."

Feedback from focus groups

- There was not a clear understanding of what the State Advisory Committee's role was or who its members were.
- The SAC was mentioned as a very positive initiative, but needed a greater profile especially the community co-chair who could represent the RWN where possible.
- The 'former SAC members' could be asked if they want to be involved/have input into RWN. They could be better utilised, for example - represent the SAC co-chair in their local area.
- More financial support is required for SAC members to be effective as a representative. Eg: travel & phone expenses.
- Questions were asked about whether the SAC brings any experienced people or just relies on the expertise within the Program. It was considered that senior people from Health, Education and Police should be part of the SAC.
- The geographic dispersion of SAC members should be preserved.
- The maximum term of SAC members to be reduced from 6 years to 4 years.
- The SAC members to control their agenda (not NSW Agriculture) and remain politically independent.

Feedback from semi-structured interviews

- The SAC was very effective but needs more grassroots input. Perhaps area subcommittees or working parties could be considered.
- If SAC is representational, are the interests of town women looked after?
- Structure of the SAC needs to be broadened to bring in working parties and subcommittees.
- The RWN provides the opportunity for rural women to have a voice, through its SAC, directly to government on issues and policies that are of particular importance to rural communities.

The Rural Women's Network newsletter

Over 13,000 people on the individual Country Web mailing list. (March 1999)

20,000 copies of the newsletter are distributed **free** – three times each year.



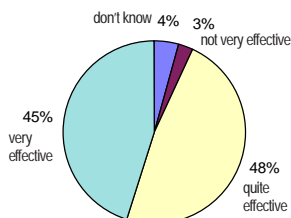
The feedback from *The Country Web* questionnaire resulted in some very practical suggestions which have been implemented in the latest Koori edition Summer 1998/99.

Overall, the Review reaffirmed that *The Country Web* newsletter is highly regarded as a resource by rural women and their families. In addition agencies see *The Country Web* as a valuable tool for providing information to rural communities.

Issues covered by the Country Web since its inception in 1993:

1	Autumn	1993	~	Country Life, Heaven or Hell
2	Winter	1993	~	Women's Health
3	Summer	1993	~	Isolation & First Women of the Land Gathering
4	Winter	1994	~	Environment
5	Spring	1994	~	Rural Families
6	Spring	1994	~	Special Drought edition
7	Summer	1994	~	Educational Opportunities
8	Autumn	1995	~	Women's Health
9	Winter	1995	~	Women in Agriculture
10	Summer	1995	~	Work and Employment
11	Winter	1996	~	The Law
12	Winter	1996	~	Technology
13	Summer	1996/7	~	Celebrating Cultural Diversity
14	Autumn	1997	~	Older and Wiser
15	Spring	1997	~	Finance and Value Adding
16	Summer	1998	~	Youth
17	Winter	1998	~	Natural Resources
18	Spring	1998	~	Women in Decision Making
19	Summer	1998/9	~	Special Koori Edition
20	Autumn	1999	~	Rural Health

What questionnaire respondents thought about *the Country Web* as an effective communications avenue for rural women.



"The Country Web is akin to 'the bible' for rural women. The Web is an excellent tool for bridging the isolation gap. Rural women find it very easy to relate to it as it's about themselves, neighbours and community."

"I leave it around so the head of the house can read it as well (he thinks he is!)"

A few statistics from the *Country Web* questionnaire respondents:

- ◆ 97% were women;
- ◆ 95% already knew about *The Country Web* and the RWN;
- ◆ 93% thought it was either *very* or *quite* effective as a source of information and communication avenue for rural women;
- ◆ 55% were aged between 31-50yrs;
- ◆ 44% lived on a commercial farm;
- ◆ 38% lived in a rural village, town or city;
- ◆ 34% were in a farm business;
- ◆ 39% were in either full or part time work;
- ◆ 89% thought the newsletter should basically stay the same in terms of layout and content;
- ◆ women's stories were the most useful and book reviews the least useful; and
- ◆ 64% thought *some* advertising would be OK.

950 questionnaires were distributed through various means: field days, SAC members, direct mailouts etc. 115 were received. The return rate was 13.5%.

Betty and Dorothy ~ typical *Web* readers

The feedback from the questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews has been combined into a little story about 'Betty' and 'Dorothy' who represent the two most *typical* respondents.

Betty and Dorothy are two rural women who live in NSW. They are familiar with the Rural Women's Network (RWN) and *The Country Web* newsletter. Betty got a *Web* from a friend and Dorothy picked hers up at a field day.

Betty lives on a commercial farm 100kms west of a country town. Dorothy lives in the town and works part-time as an administration officer.

Betty is a 'baby boomer' (41-50 years) and Dorothy is in her mid 30s. They both listen to the radio, watch TV and read newspapers, although they also each have a computer. Dorothy also surfs the net. (The RWN internet site established in June 1998, had 7713 hits by the end of that year.)

Betty and Dorothy see *The Country Web* as informative and a good communication avenue for rural women.

They thought it was easy to read and would like it to stay the same, but Betty would like the print to be a bit bigger. She also finds the coloured ink a bit hard to read at times. Dorothy also suggested more space between the columns might make it a bit easier to read.

Both felt the present balance of reader input and information from agencies is about right.

Betty found the RWN feedback and calendar useful and informative, though sometimes events had passed before she got her copy. She said the stories were "*inspirational and an excellent way to bring other women up to speed.*"

Betty liked the book reviews too but wishes she had more time to read. Dorothy enjoyed the poetry ~ "*gives one a lift for the day,*" and found the articles helpful and relevant.

Both Betty and Dorothy realised that the *Web* is expensive to produce and wouldn't mind if there was some advertising but wouldn't like to see it lose its uniqueness and become too commercial. They both said they wouldn't mind making a voluntary contribution to help pay for the costs.

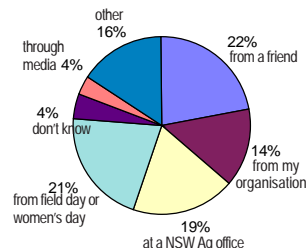
Betty's kids have all left home and she often feels quite isolated. Her husband Ron always goes to their local farmers' meetings yet Betty would really like to participate too and thought some sort of confidence building and leadership course would help to build up her skills. She remembers hearing about a program called *Stepping Stones* and thought that it might be suitable. By doing a course, she thought she'd also get to meet other women and they could support each other.

Dorothy is concerned about access to health services as her doctor is leaving town and the services at the hospital are declining. She would like her friends in the city to understand how challenging life can be in a rural area.

Dorothy would love to go to a *Women of the Land Gathering* to meet other women who could share her concerns.

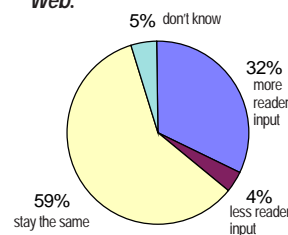
Both Betty and Dorothy were concerned that their rural communities were in decline. They thought themes for future *Country Webs* could focus on family relationships, coping with change, children, education and community development.

Where questionnaire respondents first heard about the *Country Web*.



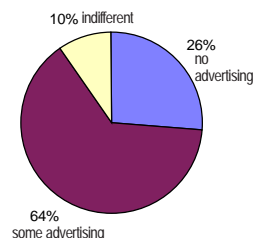
"I often recommend it to the women I meet, both city & rural."

What questionnaire respondents thought about reader input in the *Country Web*.



"Love the poems & personal stories. Your newsletter certainly has a far reaching audience and from some of the letters it's some people's only contact with the outside world."

What questionnaire respondents thought about advertising in the *Country Web*.

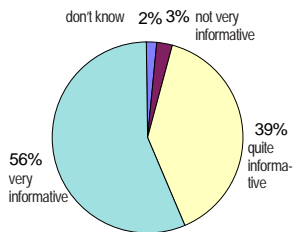


"We have to keep *The Country Web* creative, focussed, of value. If it is going to be another chit chat magazine it will die and will be useless and the government will cut it."

Conclusions drawn...

Comments and suggestions for improving the Country Web newsletter.

How questionnaire respondents rated the information in the *Country Web*.



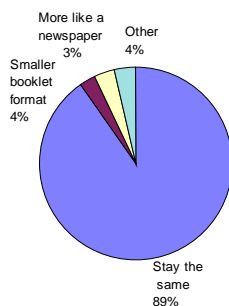
"I think the newsletter is great. I read it & then put it in our local library."

"It is constantly improving, with relevant info."

"I like the articles on self improvement and coping."

"Do not get so carried away with WOMEN ONLY issues ~ we can work & do enjoy working with men so why not include them more & not isolate them."

How questionnaire respondents thought the *Country Web* should change.



"I don't see the necessity to change for change's sake. It is informative and appeals to a wide range of needs. Why change!"

"Thank you for the teabag! What an incredibly fantastic idea."

(A tea bag was attached to each survey sent out.)

Things to keep doing:

- ◆ Please maintain a standard of sophistication without becoming threatening to a section of the community. (Don't aim too low!)
- ◆ The language is really user-friendly.
- ◆ Keep the tear off section to send to a friend [to subscribe].
- ◆ Make sure that the mailing list is kept up-to-date and correct.
- ◆ It is well set out, the articles cover wide topics and it is an enjoyable read, as well as informative.
- ◆ Don't become like the 'glossy' magazines. Your magazine is very refreshing and because it comes in the post its like a letter from 'family'.
- ◆ Short snippets of info in the Web are very useful.

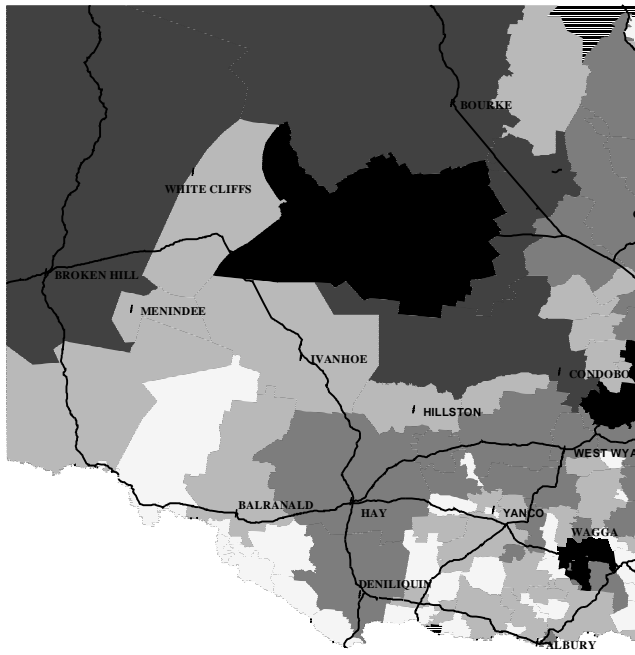
Things to think about for the future:

- ◆ Make sure the calendar dates are current. By the time we get them things are often past. Need more regional happenings.
- ◆ It is too busy, too many fonts and colours. Have more, and larger pictures. *(The first Web after the review ~ The Special Koori edition took into account many practical suggestion such as this one and changes to the format were put into place.)*
- ◆ Need more profiles of women in leadership/industry roles as well as commodity groups and stories of women in agriculture.
- ◆ Don't let advertising take over like other magazines although some advertising can help people to know where to get things.
- ◆ More frequent (although I suppose it depends on the cost). Maybe people could pay a small voluntary subscription fee to help with costs. Maybe other government departments could pay for a regular page to help with costs.
- ◆ On the cover, the lettering '*The Country Web*' should be a much more prominent colour.
- ◆ Rather than only one theme, have a variety of themes.
- ◆ More in-depth articles on the chosen theme. More depth in general with each theme (need to narrow themes more - be more specific).
- ◆ Although I don't have internet access at home more government agency world wide web sites/homepages would be good.
- ◆ Have a section that deals with current issues of concern. Put in the pros and cons of what is going to happen in regards to policy decisions.
- ◆ While political input is frowned upon there are issues which need some explanation and discussion.
- ◆ Highlight groups in each issue such as *Women Out West* [women's network based in Dubbo area.]
- ◆ Never lose sight of why it was started and review old copies.
- ◆ Give more space to the marginalised groups in our rural communities - Kooris, lesbians, single women and ethnic women; how they cope; what difficulties they experience and support services available.
- ◆ Meetings and public forums are useful vehicles for information exchange and identifying issues. These should be reported about in *the Web* including opportunities and outcomes.
- ◆ Use the Country Web as a consultation tool e.g. surveys included as inserts.

- ♦ Include more articles written by women so that women and family needs can be communicated to bureaucrats. The reader input should increase, but how do you get readers to have an input?
- ♦ Promote the Country Web more widely through the media - radio, newspapers and magazines.

This map below shows the coverage of *Country Web* subscribers based on postcodes. The postcode areas with the most concentration (over 150 subscribers) are Cobar, Dubbo, Forbes/Parkes, Orange, Mudgee, Guonedah, Wagga, Tamworth, Armidale and areas of Sydney. The map shows a few pockets where there have been no subscribers. These areas may be uninhabited.

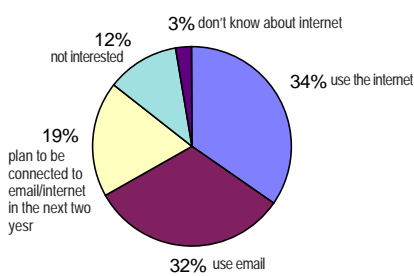
Country Web Subscribers 1999



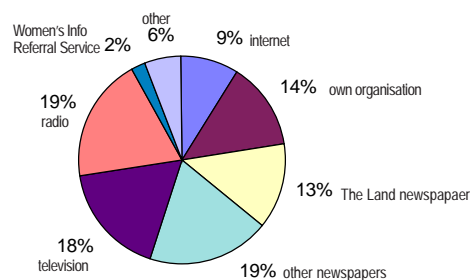
Access to information and technology

76% of respondents owned a computer.

Questionnaire respondents access to email and the internet.



How questionnaire respondents access information.



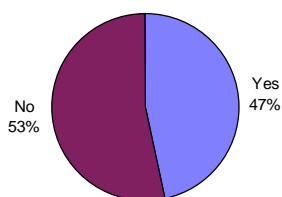


Women of the Land Gatherings

The first *Women of the Land Gathering* was jointly organised by the Rural Women's Network and Farmsafe Central West in 1993. Since then, Gatherings have been held at various locations around the state.

The RWN State Advisory Committee is responsible for assessing and selecting where Gatherings are held each year. The RWN is included on the Gathering program and continues to play a more supportive role - assisting committees when required.

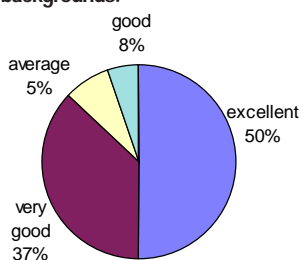
Questionnaire respondents who had been to a *Women of the Land Gathering*.



Each Gathering Committee develops their own vision but basically each Gathering aims to provide and opportunity for rural women to:

- network, share experiences and support one another;
- exchange information, views and ideas;
- raise the their profile through broad media coverage;
- access key service providers, policy makers and decision makers;
- celebrate other women's achievements; and
- access education and training through workshops and key note speakers.

How questionnaire respondents rated *Women of the Land Gatherings* as effective networking avenues for rural women from diverse backgrounds.



An interview with Frances and Amy

The feedback from the *Women of the Land Gathering* comments have been developed into a 'mock' interview between (Jenny, the journalist) and Frances who has been to a few Gatherings and Amy, who hasn't been to any. Many of the comments are taken directly from what people actually said. The names are fictitious.

Jenny: Frances, as you have been to a few of the Gatherings how did you find them?

Frances: On the whole it was great for networking. I met women from all sorts of backgrounds, although it would be good to see more **younger women** there.

It was a wonderful atmosphere. I really enjoyed the women's stories, gaining information, meeting up with friends - new and old, talking with people who had similar interests and agendas. You feel 'safe' in the environment generated. It gives you a *big hit*.

Gatherings are the one weekend in the year which is purely time for me! It has meant that you can belong to organisations or you don't have to belong to anything. You can go along and be part of a family and there is a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm. I guess women just forget that they have troubles.

Jenny: Do you think Gatherings are an effective way of raising the profile of rural women?

Frances: We women are poor marketers of ourselves. The Gatherings are a newsworthy event. We need to think how we can use it in a more productive way for the longer term effect. Maybe we should have a Gathering in Sydney to attract more media attention. There is a vital need to bridge the gap between city and country. The city people do not understand our problems any more and we are becoming more isolated and misunderstood. We need to push our stories in the city media - a very difficult task, I know.

Jenny: Do you think Gatherings give women the opportunity to talk to people in key decision making positions?

"The Women of the Land Gatherings have been intrinsic to the whole development of confidence, of getting women together, of letting them talk together, interact on a whole range of different topics. Have them [Gatherings] move around the state to key areas so that everybody has had an opportunity of being part of one."

Frances: I only had time to speak very briefly with the Minister. Many women I spoke to would have liked them to be there for longer - rather than fly in, speak and fly out. There just didn't seem to be enough time.

Jenny: *Gatherings* usually have displays from service providers about what they have to offer. Do you think these are a good way for women to find out about where to go for help and information?

Frances: The information displays were helpful for those seeking information. I've always wanted to do more study so it gave me some ideas and confidence to find out how I could go out and do it. I came home with a bag full of info!

Jenny: The *Gatherings* have in the past featured a well known speaker as a draw card. How did you find this part of the *Gathering* program?

Frances: I found this to be superb - the high profile speakers were very inspiring. It would be good if there were more keynote speakers that live and work in rural areas. They could be good role models for 'average' women like me.

Jenny: So, Frances how have the *Gatherings* challenged you to do other things?

Frances: All the *Gatherings* I have been to have been different. It adds variety which is excellent. Meeting with other women and going to workshops also helped to build on my skills - I even wrote a letter to the local newspaper telling them about the weekend. They ran a little article on me! I also found the time away gave me the opportunity to rethink my own personal goals for the future with like minded women. I am going to encourage other women from my area to attend the next *Gathering*.

Jenny: Now Amy, I know you haven't been to a *Gathering*. What has been stopping you?

Amy: I guess there are a number of reasons why I haven't been to a *Gathering*. Money is a big barrier. I know that the Rural Counselling Service sponsors women to go but by the time I'd found out it was too late, and anyway I'm not from a farm. In other years I had commitments. As the *Gatherings* are in the school holidays I always have the problem of getting someone to look after the kids.

Frances: You may not know this Amy but childcare is provided at *Gatherings*.

Amy: Thanks for that. Of course one of the biggest barriers for me has been distance. I live on the North Coast and it was such a long way to travel to Cooma [1998] or even to Moree this year. It would be good if I knew of other women who were thinking of going from my area.

It is not only the time away at the *Gathering* but also the time away from home and the time spent travelling. The travelling would probably be a couple of days extra each way for me. There are probably other women in the same situation. I spoke to a friend who is a dairy farmer and she said that it was difficult to leave because of milking and she would have to employ relief milkers which is quite expensive.

Jenny: Frances, how do you think the *Gatherings* could be improved?

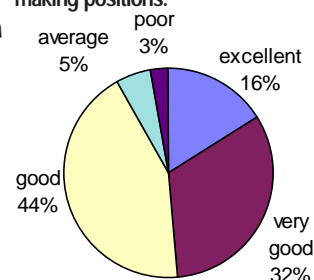
Frances: I would like to see some broader workshop topics such as: the GST [goods and services tax], marketing, risk management and retirement. I'd also like to see more self development type ones too - and workshops on dealing with financial matters.

Maybe there should also be tiered workshops, you know - from *beginners* to the more *advanced* in the same subjects so that the people who know a bit don't have to be held back with the beginners.

When I got home from the last *Gathering* I discussed the weekend with my husband. I think men could really benefit from *Gatherings* and would like to

66% of women said that money, prior commitments, distance and time were the biggest barriers to attending a *Gathering*.

How questionnaire respondents rated *Women of the Land Gatherings* as an opportunity to talk with people in key decision making positions.



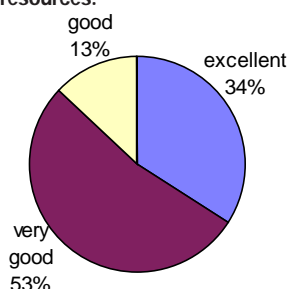
"Gatherings offer a bridge between the bureaucracy and the community."

The Cobar *Gathering* committee started the concept of the *Gathering partners program*. Their 1996 partner's program included:

- cultural, mining and heritage tours
- golf
- bowls
- an emu farm tour
- a sheep station tour
- the *Gathering* dinner.

The *Partners Program* is now an integral part of the *Gathering* programs.

How questionnaire respondents rated *Women of the Land Gatherings* as an opportunity to access information on services, resources.



see more things for them. I know there is a *partner's program* but maybe some of the workshops would be good to have both men and women there.

I also found that the time went really quickly so I'd like to see more time to network - we seemed to do a lot of sitting and listening.

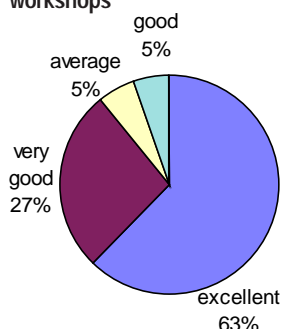
I guess now that I have been to a few I'd also like to see some follow up too. Maybe if we sat down in one of the workshops and talked about issues and solutions that could be a valuable thing to give to government agencies like the RWN.

Jenny: Amy, how do you think Gatherings would better meet your needs? How can we get you to one?

Amy: I only heard about the Gathering through the radio. Oh, and I read about it in the *Country Web*. It sounded as though it was mainly for farm women. I'm not involved in agriculture but I consider myself to be a rural woman.

Another thought I just had - for those who just can't get there - why not record the speakers and sell the tapes as say Christmas gift ideas through the *Country Web*? After talking with Frances I can see that there would be something for everyone! Maybe if it was closer to home then I might be able to go along as it certainly sounds like a great weekend. Hey Frances, maybe we could get them to do a Gathering here.

How questionnaire respondents rated *Women of the Land Gatherings* as an opportunity for learning from keynote speakers and workshops



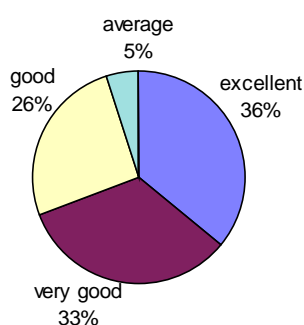
Frances: The RWN doesn't actually organise Gatherings. So, maybe you and I could get some other women together and organise our own mini regional Gathering here. I'm sure the RWN will be able to help us.

Jenny: That sounds like a great idea and I'm sure you two can do it - Frances you know what they are like so you can share the information with others and develop something to suit your needs here.

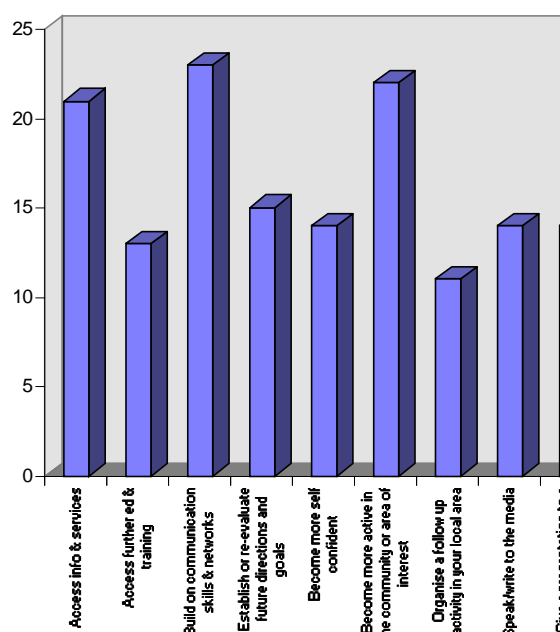
Conclusions drawn...

Comments and suggestions for improving the Women of

How questionnaire respondents rated *Women of the Land Gatherings* as an effective way of raising the profile of rural women.



This table shows how attending a Women of the Land Gathering had encouraged questionnaire respondents to change their lives.



the Land Gatherings

Things to keep doing:

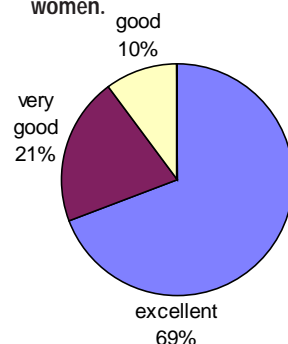
- ◆ While the RWN no longer organises Gatherings, it is important it maintains a support and coordination role.
- ◆ Continue to have independent organising committees.
- ◆ Gatherings provide support for women and encourage networking – need to continue to provide free *networking* time.
- ◆ Displays are useful for information gathering and should be included in the program.
- ◆ High powered speakers as well as women's stories are *inspirational* and should stay in the program.
- ◆ Continue passing information on from one Gathering committee to the next.

Things to think about for the future:

- ◆ There is a need to seriously involve men at Gatherings beyond the partner's program.
- ◆ RWN could hand out *needs surveys* at Gatherings to canvas ideas and learn about current issues.
- ◆ The RWN could hold mini forums as part of the workshop program as a way of canvassing issues and ideas from women.
- ◆ There is a perception that the Gatherings are only for women from the land [farmers] – need to broaden this out. Advertising needs to be in *plain English* and inviting to all. Gatherings need to be more strategic with promotions and developing links with the city and the mainstream media.
- ◆ Women who attend Gatherings should be encouraged to go back to their communities and share what they learned with other women who were unable to attend. The RWN could play a supportive role in this.
- ◆ Workshops can cater for specific needs – perhaps they could be tiered into beginners and advanced levels within subject areas.
- ◆ Decision makers who attend need to make a commitment to be there for longer periods of time so that women can talk with them.
- ◆ Time and distance are issues: need to develop ways for women from the same areas to get in touch with each other and travel together.
- ◆ Cost: Need to keep the costs to a minimum as there are many costs beyond the registration fee that women have to cover such as travel and employing casual labour while they are away.
- ◆ Tapes of speakers could be developed into gift lines.
- ◆ It was strongly suggested by one of the focus groups that the Gatherings be held once a year at a regional level with a combined state Gathering every 2-3 years over a long weekend. This would mean less distances to travel and would lower the cost. They did not state however who would take the responsibility for organising such gatherings.

The map below shows where NSW *Women of the Land Gatherings* have been held since 1993 and the approximate number of participants at each event.

How questionnaire respondents rated *Women of the Land Gatherings* as a special event for rural women.

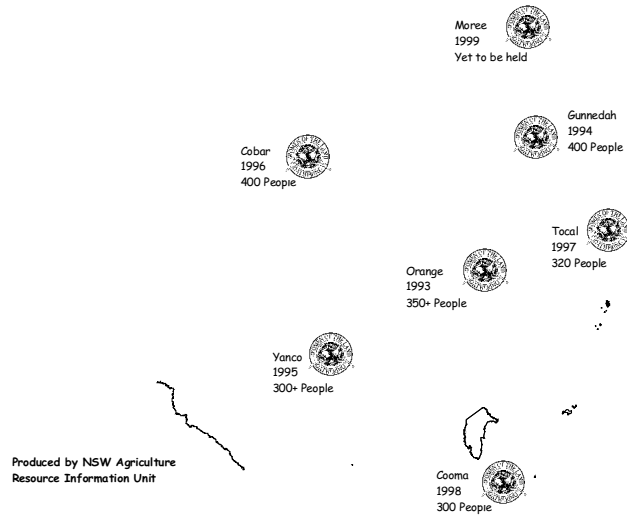


"There is really no duplication of the Gathering concept."

"There is a feeling that the Gathering 'environment' is threatening and intimidating to some people – they feel they don't have the 'right clothes'. Also some may feel they will be put 'on the spot' and asked for their opinions."

"It's important that all departments contribute to projects and subsidies for Gatherings etc. We need to form more partnerships and be recognised for doing this."

NSW Women of the Land Gatherings



Who organises the Gatherings?

Each Gathering is organised by a local committee of women and not the RWN. The RWN however does play a strong support role.



Women participating in the Cooma ~ 1998 *Women of the Land* Gathering.



The Cooma ~ 1998 *Women of the Land* Gathering committee.



The Moree ~ 1999 *Women of the Land* Gathering committee.

Feedback on priority issues for rural women

It wasn't possible to include all the specific issues raised by those involved in the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. It was often difficult to understand what people meant from many of the responses so we apologise for those that are not included. Where possible the wording has been retained so the issues reflect what a variety of people said. The issues have been grouped into loose themes.

A number of the issues raised are being addressed by various agencies. The challenge for those agencies will be to look at how their services can be better promoted to the wider community. It appears that many people involved in the Review were not aware of services such as the Department for Women's free information and referral service and the Country Care Link 1800 free confidential counselling and referral service.

Ways of addressing many of the identified issues are outside the resources of a program such as the RWN. However, it was recognised that the Country Web newsletter has been an excellent avenue in promoting services to rural people and will continue to fulfil that role in the future.

There was a strong feeling that a comprehensive needs analysis of rural women should be conducted. It was also suggested that the RWN use the Women of the Land Gatherings as an avenue for surveying women's needs on an annual basis. This would ensure the RWN is aware of current and changing issues as they emerge.

- ◆ **Access to services and facilities (especially health):** lack of adequate health services was of particular concern: The scarcity of doctors in more isolated rural areas; hospital closures; men's health and esteem; lack of adequate domestic violence and sexual assault counsellors; limited mental health services and support; increase in suicides and decline in postal and banking services.
- ◆ **Access to information and support:** there is still a real sense of isolation for many women. There is limited access to relevant information and resources; limited ongoing professional support; declining opportunities to network informally for social and emotional support which engenders a sense of community; limited opportunities to attend women's events such as Women of the Land Gatherings due to distance, time and cost; lack of confidentiality eg. legal issues and advice and need to build on crossing the divide between rural and urban women.
- ◆ **Better access to relevant education and training:** limited opportunities for more isolated women to update and gain skills for work and managing change; a need for women to enhance their facilitation and leadership skills so they can make things happen; access to flexible ongoing education both at the tertiary and non tertiary levels; education and employment opportunities for children; need for better communication and lobbying skills to build on women's confidence; women having a voice on issues and developing a more effective rural lobbying force to government; women need to be more informed about how the system works and how mainstream policy issues (not just the 'social' issues) that impact on rural life such as National Competition Policy, trade and water reforms.

Priority issues for rural women

- ◆ Access to services and facilities (especially health).
- ◆ Access to information and support.
- ◆ Better access to relevant education and training.
- ◆ Information technology and telecommunications.
- ◆ Farming/agriculture.
- ◆ Recognition of women.
- ◆ Rural and regional development.
- ◆ Financial security, business decline and survival.
- ◆ Family.
- ◆ Environment.
- ◆ Roads and transport.

"I think the most important issue is mainstreaming of rural women's issues so that they become not only the business of a little program like the RWN, but it is everyone's business."

"Australia is losing its rural culture – this is what makes our younger generation what they are and it is important that we educate them so the information isn't lost and it's carried through from generation to generation."

"RWN to continue to concentrate on decision making, managing change and networking – these issues will always remain."

"Rural women's issues should be considered across the spectrum – mainstreamed."

"Gender audits should be conducted by all agencies – looking at age, gender and ethnicity."

"RWN should have a role in supporting women's groups and forums."

- ♦ **Information technology and telecommunications:** assisting women to understand technology and its potential; need to ensure access to technology is at an affordable cost; need reliable post, phone and internet services.
- ♦ **Farming and agriculture:** equitable farm succession planning; wool industry reform; how to cope better on the land; developing sustainable and profitable farming skills; survival of family farm; encouraging industry to be more women friendly; encouraging children into farming; getting a voice for agriculture to the city consumers; developing native foods; balancing on and off farm work; keeping up to date with new techniques and information and developing better marketing.
- ♦ **Recognition of women:** appreciation of women's input to society and how this enhances outcomes for the whole community; share ideas and inspiration; using women as positive role models; more access to decision making positions; recognition of women as equal partners in farming and farm women to feel equal to other working women.
- ♦ **Rural and regional development:** creating employment opportunities for self, partner, children and staff to stay on farms and in rural communities; community development as a way of building a positive future – help women to do it for themselves and build social capital;
- ♦ **Financial security, business decline and survival:** having an equitable tax system for rural people; problem of economic decline in rural areas and effects on small business enterprises; lack of support for diversifying and value adding; increasing debt and lack of financial management skills; business opportunities and assistance grants for new initiatives; closure of banks, need for marketing and business skills.
- ♦ **Family:** safety on farm, home and street; supporting families to cope with change (especially men); lack of childcare and children's services; lack of time; issues within the home such as violence and support.
- ♦ **Environment:** natural resource management.
- ♦ **Roads and transport:** road safety and school buses.